

On Friday 14th June a group of children and young people travelled to Westminster to tell MPs, Peers, policy officials, journalists, prison governors and a handful of academics, what it has been like for them to experience parental imprisonment, and what they think should be done to change that experience for other children. The children are all connected to organisations that support children with a family member in prison. There are very few of these organisations across the UK and most were represented. Time-Matters (formally The MyTime Project), Children Heard and Seen, Vox Liminis Kin project, Nepacs and Families Outside had gathered children from England and Scotland. The conference was conceived of and organised by Dr Lorna Brookes ([My Time](#)/ Liverpool John Moores University) and Sarah Burrows ([Children Heard and Seen](#)).

It was a child-led conference so the registration, key notes, questions, ideas, planning of the conference all came from children and young people.

The role of the adults was to listen to the children and young people, and answer their questions about why the system is as it is.

**If you read nothing else then please read the children's 7 Calls to Action:**

1. There should be a policy where any offenders who have a child under 18 yrs should not have their name or home address printed in the press to protect the children and family from community backlash
2. In all prison visits, children and families should be given at least a 10 minute warning that their visit is coming to an end so that they can say a goodbye that is not in a rush
3. All children with a parent in prison should be entitled to family day visits and these should not be held back to punish an offender.
4. More consideration should be given to the needs of children when a parent is arrested
5. Children with a parent in prison should be eligible for pupil premium money at school. We are disadvantaged and should be supported as other disadvantaged children are.
6. If children of prisoners were priorities in the same way that looked after children are for school admission it would not only help us with our education but give our families a real reason to disclose we have a parent in prison to gain the support. At the moment a disclosure equates to little or nothing and at worse unwanted judgment.
7. More funding should be provided so that all children affected by parental imprisonment can access a specialised support group in their local area to reduce their sense of isolation and increase their coping strategies. We should not be 'tagged on' to wider support services – our needs are very specific

Through the day a number of topics were explored and I'm going to set out in summary what the children said about each topic. I am not adding my own commentary as this conference was for children to express their views. Some children want to be identified and others don't which is why not all comments are attributed to an individual.

**What it's like when you parent goes to prison**

- It's important to know when you can take your armour off. I must use my experience wisely. I must not let it kill me. My experience and I must not falter. But it does not define me - *Vox Liminis Kin project*
- If children can't see their parent in prison it's very sad. Every child should get to be happy all the time. Everyone should be nice because it is hard that my Dad is in prison. They misunderstand me when I'm sad - it's because I cannot see my Dad. You can write letters but it's not the same. No one should have to live with sadness in their heart. I know it's tough for the parent in prison. But what about us? Thank you for listening. *Lacey*
- I was 8 and my Mum was my best friend. One day I got dropped at my Grandmothers' and then it was a week, and 2 weeks and 3 weeks and she didn't come back and I was told she was in prison. Everything was not the same. My routine changed. My school changed. All I wanted was to see her and to know that she's ok. I had to mature before I even knew how to. I couldn't be a child and I needed to be a child. I was bullied a lot. It wasn't the kids it was their parents who gossiped and the children picked up and were told they couldn't play with me any more. It was a lot to handle, the talk that your Mum is a bad person.
- I found out Dad was going to court 2 days before court. I was 16 and my brother was 14 and my wee sisters didn't know. I felt like something was going on but no idea what. My mum went to court and she told me he got 4 years ... I had to grow up really fast. I had to get a job really quickly.
- I was 12 or 11 and I woke up one morning and was dropped off at my brothers house. I didn't know what for and my mum and dad left. Mam picked me up. Got dropped to my aunties and told that our dad had gone to prison. It was only about a year later that we got told he'd got 4 years. Accused of sexual assault. I did a bit of research. I found out why he was accused. That was the wrong thing to do. I found out all the details. I found out they'd put out the address. Luckily for us a lot of people round us were respectful so we didn't have to move.
- Sometimes people say 'You're better off' well that's not for other people to decide. Its not right for people to say that! Spending time with my dad from quite a young age I used to ride bikes with my dad and it was the best thing. I'd look forward to it every day. For it to be taken away so quickly, it was heartbreaking. People expect us to get on and it's just not right
- I couldn't give my Dad a hug goodbye. My sister was watching from the living room window and was sick all over the floor. It just messes with your head to the point where some people just give up.
- The things that help me is making a memory box and making stress busters. I also bought a teddy bear for my dad on Father's Day and I put it in the box.
- You should get more time to say goodbye to your parent properly if you're not going to get to see them.

### **Prison Visits**

- They would be better if: there was more privacy, other places to go like a garden or outside space - *Luke*; if the food was cheaper, because you are only allowed a certain

amount, this isn't ideal for bigger families because they won't be able to get enough food. For example, a packet of crisps is £3 and the limit is only £20 - *Jay*

- When my dad was in prison he was ready to move to an open prison. He had to move to a prison that was 77 miles away which is a 3 hour car journey. But there was a closer prison that was 7 miles away from the prison he was already at. If he didn't go to the prison 77 miles away he would go back to the other prison he was already at and lose all his privileges such as higher paid work, a better-ish room and better seats when we come to visit. I think this was inconvenient for me to visit therefore I only visited 3 times over the whole year. The rule that should be changed is that prisoners should be moved to as close as possible to their children. If my dad was closer I would have seen him more often. *Luke*
- My first visit was uncomfortable and intimidating when I got searched. The guards were very strict in their tone and grumpy when they told me what to do. The experience was bad enough, let alone how they looked and spoke to us. We haven't done anything wrong for them to treat us like this which makes us feel like bad people. *Khizir*
- On one of my visits when we were being searched they sent the dogs in to smell us, they were REALLY BIG German Shepherds. They scared the smaller children and some even started to cry. My sister started to cry, she was only four at the time the dogs were too close sniffing her she was terrified! When on a visit if you went to a toilet you would think it was the place with the most privacy but the guards will stand inside and watch you it felt very uncomfortable now I go to toilets with locks on. This made me feel like the bad person like a criminal but I knew that I had done nothing wrong. After coming out of the toilet you were searched AGAIN! *Jay*
- In some prisons if you need the toilet you have to leave the prison and you are not allowed in. This is not FAIR! Children want to spend time with their parents. *Khizir*
- When you are 10 you can wear hoodies. When you turn 11 you can't. *Luke* The whole visit you are building up confidence to speak and include them back into daily life, but there is no warning for children to say goodbye and you just have to say goodbye and go. *Luke*
- I can't sleep the night before visits, so I'm really tired. It's a 200 mile trip and the roads are narrow and twisty and me and my brother get travel sick.
- We'd have to get to the visit 2 hours early so that we'd get the first ticket and get the full two hours.
- When it was winter we couldn't drive there. We'd have had to go by 2 trains and 2 taxis and we couldn't. One lady left at 5 am and got home at midnight. We didn't see my Dad from Christmas to Easter
- Our regular visit lasted 2 hours and it was a 10 hour trip. Dad couldn't leave his seat and couldn't touch us after a first hug and kiss and we couldn't sit on his knee. It made me think my Dad didn't want me. The rules were explained but I still didn't understand.

- Family days were much better - more fun and less scary and intimidating. Dad could walk around and play with us. There was a much happier atmosphere. They made me feel more like a family again.
- We had to wait 2 weeks/ 4 weeks/ 4 months for our first visit
- Because our Dad was convicted of historic sexual assault we weren't given the same activities as other children. We weren't allowed to do arts and crafts.
- School said my wee sisters couldn't go to the visits because they were on Friday mornings.
- I wasn't allowed to go to family visits because I was 16. I missed out on 6 months of visits because of that.
- A prison officer made the visits so welcoming and fun that my brother thought he was just having a normal day with his Dad
- I don't see my Dad
- I like someone to be with me when I visit my Dad because I'm not sure I trust him
- Even though we can't see our Dad it doesn't mean we don't miss him
- I've never been to see my dad in prison. I only get to call my dad when I'm at my Nanny's house because my Nanny has a telephone. You should know that not all children see their parents in prison. Sometimes the police won't let you see the parent if the parent has not been good, even if you are upset about it. *Leah*
- I have only been to see my step dad once because I got banned from the visits. This makes me very sad that I cannot see my step-dad. I think that the guards are very suspicious of all the children and it's not fair because we are there to spend time as a family. I didn't even get time to speak to my step dad properly because they stopped the visit early. I think this is unfair and I am really upset. It is really hard not being allowed to see my stepdad. I wish my stepdad was at home. We should all be happy. I don't think it's fair that the police decides. PLEASE RESPECT US! *Emily*

### **Questions from the children to a prison Governor**

- Why do prison officers have frowns on their faces?
- Do you treat everyone the same or do you treat them differently because of what they've done?
- Why does the prison have to be so far away? Why does it have to be that far? If you can't put them in the closest prison why can't it be in the next closest prison?
- Why wasn't I warned my first visit with my Mum would be a closed visit? When I got there I was 9 and the hug and kiss you get in the first few minutes is everything to you, and when I was told I wouldn't get that I had an asthma attack so I never got to see my Mum at all.
- Why is there a limit on how much money you can bring in to buy food and drink? Why is it so expensive?
- Why are visitors only allowed to wear certain clothes?
- Why do prisoners have to share rooms?

- My Dad said going through prison security is like an airport security check. Is it?
- Why do people move prisons?
- Why are there so few phones for prisoners to call us from?
- Why aren't there more family visits?
- Why aren't prisoners allowed their own phones?
- Why can't the parent walk around during the visit?
- If a mum or dad goes to prison for fraud why do the family have to pay it back?
- Why do prisoners not have much time or space to go outside and exercise?

### **Experiences of the media / questions for journalists**

- We couldn't go home because newspaper went out with misinformation and my Dad's name and our address. We had to move from there.
- Social media has had a large impact on multiple people putting out information that is personal and can put people at risk. Media has gone from being a source of truth to lies, sensationalism and they put a story out there that is far fetched and never happened. They are getting tiny snippets of information and adding extra information on which is a wrong things to do.
- That's my home where I live. I should be able to feel safe and content. Why did the address need to be published in the paper to make income for the paper? I was 15 and I had to live in that home because I had nowhere else to go.
- From a few details they made a whole story about it. I don't think anyone thought of the impact it would have on the family.
- Why does a person's face, address, second name need to be in the papers? Why does it have to backfire on the children and everyone who knows the person?
- The media is all about money. I don't think you care about the actual people. Why can't they be better and think about the families and everyone else instead of just thinking about money.

### **Failure of support services**

- My siblings were assigned a social worker but I wasn't until I was 17. I felt like I'd been shoved in a cupboard and forgotten about. I arranged to meet the social worker in a coffee shop. On four occasions she cancelled on me while I was sat in Costa waiting for her.

### **Experiences at school and things children would like at school**

- A trainee teacher said 'you don't want to end up like your mother do you?' That hurt me because my Mum is my hero. She is to this day. She gave birth to me and gave me morals and confidence.
- One of the most devastating things about having a parent in prison is the fact that you go to school and you get labelled with what your father or mother has been sent away with by your friends and it gets spreads all across the school which makes you an easy target to get bullied. You get frowned upon every time you see people at school. You're walking to school wanting to get an education and make something of

yourself in life, and then you're walking in and getting the opposite. It's not right and it kills people.

- We would like a family room at school where you can go into to talk about things.
- Teachers should get training on how to handle things.
- We should learn about it in school so that more people are aware of the situation.
- We don't want teachers to keep asking if we're ok, or taking us out of class because that draws attention to it.
- Sometimes you don't want a teacher to know in case they don't treat you the same.
- Workshops like the KIN project Waiting Room workshop would be good in schools.
- There should be private places for children to talk about these things in school - not just an empty office with other members of staff walking in and out.
- Bullying in school is normal if you have a parent in prison.

### **Thoughts on support organisations**

- I count myself as one of the lucky ones. I say 'MyTime' is the best kept secret because not many people get the support we do. Every child should get to open up on things and not be criticised for it.
- I want children who are in the same position as me to feel safe.
- I love Children Heard and Seen because we do really fun things and I feel good talking about it in the group because it helps me with how I feel. The good thing about it is the places we go to and the things we do together. *Kayim*
- This is why we need support like the support from Children Heard and Seen to be happy. Every child should have the support we get from Children Heard and Seen. *Leah*
- The charity Children Heard and Seen has helped me realise I am not the only one going through these experiences. *Luke*
- I like coming to Children Heard and Seen because when I come here I feel supported and that I can discuss anything with them! *Khizr*